

Research in Visual Arts: Communication Through Materials

Undergraduate Research Grant 2010-2011

Honors Thesis

By

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My research with modern and ancient pigments has been to both create a language through materials and also gain further knowledge in the craft of making paint. My research began with the careful dissection of “The Artist’s Handbook of Materials and Techniques” by Ralph Mayer. This is a dictionary for artists first published in 1940, which defines the chemical makeup of materials, and up to date processes. Through academic practices artists learn the basic ways to use materials available to them. Most of the time these supplies are simply purchased from the local art store and used haphazardly, the purchases unaware of the history behind them, or how they are made. Modern access has erased the physical connection of the artist to the material, in my opinion. My interests were sparked by questioning from where, and how these easily obtainable materials came about, and more importantly how to create them myself.

This research grant allowed me to obtain all natural oils and man made mediums described in the Mayer handbook, and prepare them as in the past with pigments. The pigments I chose such as yellow ochre, burnt umber, and gold leaf which are mined from the earth and used since ancient times. Contrary to the earthen substances I also included non-traditional materials such as reflective pigments, glitter, glass, and makeup produced using modern methods. Through extensive experimentation I achieved a thorough knowledge of how to properly combine these materials to achieve the desired

result. The 'experiments' were produced in an orderly, semi-scientific process and resulted in the first art piece entitled, *alchemy ii*.

Alchemy in the philosophical sense, is the search for the eternal elixir of life, the gold of the unknown aspect of life. I interpreted this as a search for the eternal question of 'why' in humanity. Why do we do what we do? Why do things happen? Why are we here? The philosophy of alchemy then is not to actively search for these answers but instead to accept and be aware of the wonder and beauty in which we live daily. By slowing down we may accept what is subtle but significant. Only then can we experience this elixir by cultivating the capacity to be still, and open to everything both inside and around us.

The practice to slow down and practice a heightened awareness was an unexpected result of my daily experimentation with materials. Each day I would approach the studio, tear the sumi paper into small palm-size pieces, align them in rows, and label them with a code corresponding to the experimental pigment and mediums of the day. I then proceeded to work until over one thousand 'experiments' existed from the use of all the selected materials. I experienced a calm in the repetition of this objective approach to painting. The systematic, repetitive process allowed my mind to separate from the physical state and ponder things beyond the mechanics of

what I was actually doing. This experience, which is difficult to describe in written language, can only be compared to a type of meditation, where the mind transcends the literal common consciousness into a depth, which the brain is capable of achieving. This was the feeling that I wanted to recreate in the installation entitled *alchemy ii*. All one thousand plus pieces were installed in the Special Projects Room, Hopkins Hall, The Ohio State University.

I approached the room as a blank canvas attempting to create a meditative space for viewers to experience. I first loosely applied a two-foot wide chair rail of acrylic paint, recreating the color of the walls in my own house. The cool gray bluish white paint lent a perfect and slight contrast to the pieces of white sumi paper, which held the 'experiments'. Over about a week I arranged and rearranged the experiments, painting this irregular but continuous band that grew engulfing the room, constricted only by the allocated width of the mock chair rail. The experiments were attached by only long thin insect pins, allowing the small thin pieces of paper to appear alive as they fluttered with the unpredictability of the air. Constant movement was present with changes of the daylight. This room included two windows to the outside, and one on the door to the hall. This cross section of light was the only light allowable to properly view the installation. I attempted to remove the most amount of man-made



influence on the art, including the painter's nemesis, the fluorescent light bulb. The cool winter snow outside reflected the sun's rays in providing natural changing light even on a cloudy day.

Light, reflection, decay, growth, movement, and change were all present in *alchemy ii*. The location was a quiet place, and the depth of the experiment could only be seen by those who were able to notice what was subtle, but significant. The viewers who spent extended time in the room, with the door closed, experienced the serene, changing space. The room could be explored for hours as the viewer both attempted to decipher the experimental coding and also enjoyed the quiet space in an otherwise hectic area. One could arrive at the windows, looking through the resin with captured material 'experiments' to the world outside, where the decay of nature was present but beautifully coated in the winter white color of Ohio snow.

The freedom of that closed room was the greatest success of the hours spent with my Undergraduate Research Grant. I felt that I had successfully communicated that indescribable experience of transcending your conscious mind, learning how to live in the quiet void of daily life, and notice the subtlety that makes our lives forever connected to all around us. These experiences would be different for all who explored the work, but that is what proved to be the greatest success. As I

continued to explore trying to create this environment void of distraction, I moved on to a series of stretched linen 10x10" canvases. In these paintings I referenced images of the internal body using the 15<sup>th</sup> edition of Henry Gray's anatomy and surgical reference book. My interest in science was again apparent as I continued to read the entire technical descriptions of the human body. This fascination with the human body was consistently present in my life, including the aspiration to be a surgeon, but again brought to the surface with trauma that left me facing mortality.

This section of the artwork was prompted by my ongoing recovery and the images that I had seen in relation to my own body. It would be impossible to dismiss the impact of trauma on my artwork because it had engulfed every aspect of life. I can however disconnect these references of a broken body, as they became abstracted into an image to which I continuously balanced responding to visual cues with color and texture. The human body both grows as it decays. It changes constantly and is connected in all ways, somewhat as we are to the world around us. I began with these images of a broken ribcage, lacerated liver, severed spinal cord, and crushed vertebrae as a catharsis. However, as quickly as the images appeared on the canvas, they were gone, abstracted by the need to create a separate world on this limited space.

I also referenced my admiration of Buddhist art. The vertical paintings, mostly created on paper with water-based ink, were used as a meditative tool to take the believer/viewer out of this physical world and into another, namely the sub-conscious. These abstract philosophical practices are not something that I literally follow, but I am however intrigued by the ideas that form them. Could it be possible to take someone into a heightened conscious experience simply by visual renderings? This is what I had attempted to create in the previous *alchemy ii* installation, but in that piece the viewer was literally in the artwork. Would it be possible to achieve the same on only a two-dimensional surface, while maintaining my need for subtly and lightness?

The results varied in my *exile topology* series of paintings. They may not be controversial, or have shock value, but that is in fact what I am attempting to achieve. I wanted to create a space for contemplation, a portal to a world of heightened awareness, void of material excess and social chaos. Those who spend time with the paintings, longer than the average seven to ten second adult attention span, can see the layers of thin reflective and matte pigments. Sometimes these layers seem to puncture the linen and hide beneath it, while other sections noticeably layer on top of each other breaking the constrictions of the two dimensional surface.

I did not approach the paintings with a final result in mind, I did however form taxonomy of ideas that would be constant in the evolution these paintings and future works.

**Alchemy:**

-My practice of creation can parallel this philosophical system in that I search for the golden *Dan* (elixir), the universal essence that is the principle, reality, and true nature of an entity. This search for a universal evolution from an imperfect, ephemeral, corruptible state into one where the hidden truth exists is accomplished in both my practice and product. Intermixtures of materials allows for a time of meditation as I prudently concoct a palette rich in meaning and complexion

**Decay:**

-From the Latin *de-* + *cadere* –to fall more at chance  
 -Slow change from a state of soundness or perfection  
 -You must know life to see decay  
 -Ephemeral, deconstructed, scarred  
 -Materials: unstable, oils not fixed, fragility of linen, damaged papers, transparent papers, -tissue paper, wax, unfinished porcelain, broken pavement, chemical reactions, -deconstructed mineral pigments  
 -Color references decay: earth browns, gray, and green

**Growth:**

-A purely biological unfolding of events involved in an organism changing gradually from a simple to a more complex level  
 -A progression from a simpler to more complex form  
 -Emergence, expansion, dispersion, swell, tumification (the organic process whereby tissue becomes swollen by the accumulation of fluid within it)  
 -Materials: broken from original restraint, addition of layers of paper or material, melted wax, liquefied pigments  
 -Color references growth: white, green, reflective materials

**Exile Topology:**

-“Exile” enforced removal from one’s country, when country is “home”, and “home” is: your personal most serene state of being  
 -“Topology” from the Greek τόπος “place” and λόγος “study”, concerned with the spatial properties that are preserved under continuous deformations of objects, manifolds and

their embeddings in other manifolds, some are invariant under certain kind of transformations, depend not on the exact shape of the object but rather on the way they are put together, and where they exist

-The continuous image of a connected space

**Preserve:**

-Keep or maintain in unaltered conditions

-Keep safely and protect from: harm, decay, loss, destruction, damage, be the keeper of

-Remember destruction, remember that moment, remember the change, remember the realization, remember the growth in "home", remember the pain, and remember the freedom in the confinement

-Stop time

-Materials: gold, glass, epoxy, encasement, glaze

-Create monumental status through materials

-Plastinate: preserve tissue of the body for research purposes

**Visceral:**

-Obtained through intuition rather than from reasoning or observation, intuitive

-From the Latin viscera, plural of viscus (any internal organ of the body)

-Relating to or affecting the viscera

**Circularity:**

-Cyclical

- Rebirth

**Truth:**

-Veracity, authenticity, veracity, precision, being, entity (that which is perceived or known or inferred to have its own distinct existence: living or non-living), essence, inmost nature, inner reality, fidelity.

-Materials: glass, epoxy, gold, silver, copper, wax (reacts to environment)

**Subtle:**

-Difficult to detect or grasp by the mind or analyze

-Able to make fine distinctions (a subtle psyche)

-Spreading in a hidden way

-Elusive

-Diminutive

-Evanescent

By defining these terms I also uncovered their antithesis. With further exploration I was then able to attach results of my 'experiments' with materials to the selected words. This is what then helped me then have reference meaning for the visual representation. The visual definitions remain stored in memory, and influence decision-making in creating paintings, even if they are not depicted literally.

The *exile topology vi-x* paintings were my attempt to reference the worlds in which the viewer would get lost exploring. In ways I feel that I had started to achieve this, and at the same time I feel that they could be revisited in the future. The results of the paintings were not as successful as *alchemy ii* in my opinion because of their constrictions to the stretcher bars and lack of movement and change in the material. These experiments and paintings will ultimately inform the art works that will follow by keeping the combination of a methodical planning process, and uninhibited responses to the creation itself. I intend on keeping the same ideas included in the previous taxonomy and add some questions of our obsessions with pop culture and fake façade that comes along with that. I will be able to examine my attraction to the use of makeup as materials for paint. I also intend on pushing past the restriction of the square space of the painting surface and explore alternative materials and installation.



alchemy ii  
mixed medium installation  
2010  
13' x 20' room (approximately)



exile topology vi  
pigment, epoxy, poppy oil, linen  
2010  
10" x 10"





exile topology vii  
pigment, poppy oil, wax, pavement  
2010  
10" x 10"





exile topology viii  
pigment, poppy oil, wax, pavement, linen  
2010  
10" x 10"



exile topology ix

pigment, poppy oil, wax, pavement, watercolor pencil, linen

2010

10" x 10"





exile topology x  
pigment, poppy oil, wax, pavement, linen  
2010  
10" x 10"